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Changing Unionism in Canada

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Abstract

The paper examines how the 1980's have affected Canada's labour movement and how unions have responded to the changing environment. The focus is on major trends and patterns in union membership and new organizing activity, collective bargaining approaches and outcomes, and on strategies towards consultation and cooperation, which both highlight challenges confronting unions as well as illustrate how they have adapted to the fundamentally altered economic, social and political climate of the post-recession era.

The paper notes that despite serious challenges to their very legitimacy unions in Canada have not only survived but have shown a remarkable vibrancy and dynamism in their organizing and bargaining approaches and in their cooperation and consultation strategies. There have been stepped up eforts to organize the unorganized, to forge unity in the ranks, and to solidify and strengthen the movement through closer links with other community groups. Organizational structures and affiliations are being reassessed to meet the changing needs and aspirations of membership. At the same time unions are assuming a leadership role in social and economic reforms through actively lobbying for legislation on such issues as pay and employment equity, national daycare, improved pensions, and through coordinated campaigns for full employment policies and against free trade with the United States. In so doing they have demonstrated their ability to adapt to changing circumstances in assuming flexibility in their traditional goals, priorities, organizational structures, and policies and practices. This flexibility, and the return to the CIO style of unionism of the 1930's, augurs well for the future of the Canadian labour movement.

The paper concludes that the fact that unions in Canada have survived is not to suggest that they have overcome the challenges confronting them or that their future is assured. Unions face an uphill task in organizing retailing and banking, the two large and expanding sectors of non-union employment. The union movement remains divided. The growing trend towards mergers and raids to enlarge membership bases without regard for traditional jurisdiction has the potential for increased inter-union conflict and rivalry. Unions also continue to face a difficult and uncertain public policy environment emanating from the Charter, and from adverse legislative changes in a number of labour relations jurisdictions. There is also evidence of serious conflict in public sector bargaining on privatization, deregulation and cost restraint issues. The Canadian trade union movement, it appears, is still at crossroads.

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CHANGING UNIONISM IN CANADA

The labour movement in Canada is in a period of marked change and adaptation. The threat to its organizational and bargaining strength from a vastly altered economic, social, demographic and public policy environment has made it necessary for labour to look beyond its traditional methods and approaches to consider more effective ways to achieve its goals. Union priorities, strategies and policies have been changing to cope with new realities. For example, there have been stepped up efforts to organize the unorganized, to forge unity in the ranks for demonstrating their collective strength in high-profile organization drives and in major first agreement negotiations, and to improve their public image through more aggressive public relations. Organizational structures and affiliations are being reassessed to meet the changing needs and aspirations of the rank and file. At the same time unions are assuming a leadership role in social and economic reforms through lobbying actively for legislation on such issues as pay and employment equity, improved occupational and health standards, national daycare, better public pensions, more effective protection for part-time workers, and through coordinated campaigns for full employment policies and against free trade initiatives. Unions have also forged close links with

community organizations such as the church which has come to believe that "unions have an essential role to play in defending the dignity and rights of working people".[1] Organized labour appears to have realized that in order to survive and to withstand the erosion of its organizational and bargaining strength, it has to become a more pro-active, aggressive and innovative social institution rather than being reactive, defensive and passive. The alternative is to face a steady decline in its role and importance like the labour movement in the United States.

The purpose of this paper is to provide perspectives on how the 1980s has affected Canada's labour movement and how unions have responded to the changing environment. The focus is on major trends and patterns in union organization, bargaining approaches and outcomes, and on strategies towards consultation and cooperation, which both highlight challenges confronting unions and illustrate that, for the most part, unions are adapting well to the fundamentally altered economic, social and political climate of the post-recession era. It is not insignificant that unions in Canada have survived, and in some cases strengthened themselves, despite challenges to their very legitimacy, and without relinquishing the adversarial culture which spawned their growth. As the former Canadian education director of the Steelworkers union recently remarked, appeals for less adversarial union styles betray a lack of understanding for union culture: "adversarial relations mean a frank acknowledgment of interests and a willingness to work things out".[2] In Canada, union culture has meant a concerted effort to meet the economic crisis head on, to devise new ways of responding to the declines in membership growth, and to explore new areas of potential union activity.

I. Union Organization and Growth

A recent survey of union membership, conducted by Statistics Canada as a supplement to the December 1984 Labour Force Survey, showed that there was a total of 3.87 million workers who were members of a union in 1984. Another 526,000 workers, although not formally union members, were covered by a collective agreement between their employer and a union. Judging by these estimates over 37 percent of the paid workers in Canada were organized and close to 42 percent were covered by collective agreements.[3] The degree of unionization varies by gender, age, education, industry, occupation and region. For example, 42 percent of all males and 32 percent of all women were unionized in 1984. Union membership was significantly higher among full-time workers and prime age (35-54 age group) men than among part-time workers, and youth; among the highly educated (with post-secondary degree) and workers with less than 8 years of schooling than among workers with secondary education. By industry, union organization was at or near saturation (with two-thirds or more workers organized) in public administration, quasi-public education and health sectors, communications and utilities, in such manufacturing industries as paper and transportation equipment, and in non-metal mining. Almost one-half of the workers were unionized in fishing, metal mining, food and beverage, textile, wood products, primary metals non-metalic mineral products and in transportation. By occupation, the proportion of workers unionized was two-thirds or more among teachers, nurses, government administrators, and in most blue-collar processing, machining assembling and trades occupations; and between two-fifths and one-half among professionals in life sciences, social sciences (except in law and jurisprudence), medicine and health, in such clerical occupations as file clerks and receptionists, among protective

service and hotel workers, and in most fishing, forestry and mining occupations. By province, British Columbia, Quebec and Newfoundland had the highest rate of unionization; Alberta was the least unionized, while in other provinces unionization was close to or slightly less than the national average.[4] These figures indicate that the major strongholds of unions in Canada are blue-collar workers in goods-producing industries, a majority of whom are men in their prime age, public and quasi-public sector workers, and employees in transportation, communications and utilities. Unions have not made significant inroads in organizing women, part-time workers, youth and professionals employed in commercial service industries and white-collar employees in the goods-producing sector.

Against the background of this diverse pattern of unionization, structural changes in employment pose a serious challenge to unions. Employment is stagnant or declining in heavy manufacturing, resource based industries and in public and quasi-public sectors - the traditional union strongholds - for a variety of reasons: severe international competitive pressures, rapid pace of technological change, public sector restraints, policy shifts towards privatization and deregulation, or demographic changes. On the other hand, there is a continuing shift in employment towards the service sector and white-collar occupations where unions have traditionally found it difficult to organize workers except in public and quasi-public services. Unless unions succeed in organizing workers in trade, finance and services, and take steps to make unionization more attractive to women, youth and professionals, the future vitality of the labor movement may be at stake. The recent pattern of membership growth and new organizing activity indicates

that unions are becoming increasingly conscious of the need to change their approaches and strategies to bring the unorganized into the union fold.

Labour Canada figures show that the total union membership in Canada has been rising steadily since 1983, following a recessionary decline in 1982. In a short span of 4 years unions have gained almost 200,000 members far exceeding the 55,000 members lost during the recession.[5] However, the membership growth has not kept pace with the cyclical revival in labour force and employment growth. Consequently, the union density, that is the proportion of non-agricultural paid workers who are union members, has dropped from a peak of 40.0 percent in 1982 to 37.7 percent in 1986. Labour Canada figures also reveal that not all unions have been able to recoup losses in their membership incurred during the recession. For example among the sixteen largest unions with a membership of 50,000 or more in 1982, six unions, five of them in the public sector, have continued to show sustained gains in membership. Of the remaining ten which experienced recessionary losses in their membership, only two, the Canadian Auto workers and the Quebec-based Social Affairs Federation, have fully recouped and have surpassed the pre-recession membership levels. The other eight, seven of them internationals, have yet to reach their pre-recession membership. Indeed, six of these eight unions have shown consecutive losses in their membership largely on account of weak employment recovery in western provinces and in construction and resource-based industries. Included among these unions are the United Steel Workers of America, Canadian Paper Workers Union, International Woodworkers of America and such building trades unions as carpenters, labourers and electric workers.

Unions have been bolstering their membership in a number of ways. First and foremost is of course the new organizing activity. Mergers and raiding, especially of independent or unaffiliated unions, are also on the rise, leading to a blurring of traditional jurisdictions, a resurgence of the Canadian autonomy issue within the internationals,[6] and larger unions.[7] Also the relative importance of internationals in total union membership continues to decline.[8]

An analysis of certifications granted by labour relations boards in Canada's eleven jurisdictions shows that the pace of new organizing activity has increased markedly, particularly in the Ontario, Quebec and federal jurisdictions. The total number of new certifications has risen from 2509 in 1983 to 2,907 in 1985, following two consecutive years of decline. Over 223,000 new workers have been added to the union rank and file as a result of the new certifications, almost 200,000 in the Ontario, Quebec and federal jurisdictions alone.[9] However, decertifications are also increasing, particularly in Ontario, the federal jurisdiction and in the western provinces except Manitoba. Consequently the net addition to new membership is less than the total from new certifications.

Significant growth in smaller unions is another indicator of increased organizing activity. In 1986, there were 91 small national and international unions with a membership of between 50 and 999, up from 64 in 1985 and 49 in 1982. Of these, 77 were national unions, up from 51 in 1985 and 35 in 1982. The number of small independent local organizations over the same period was also up from 246 to 273.[10]

Both international and national unions have made a concerted effort to increase their ranks. For example, between July 1982 and July 1984,

Steelworkers' organizing drives in Quebec and the Atlantic provinces resulted in the addition of 98 new units, comprising 4,500 workers; organizing drives over the same period in Ontario yielded 44 new certifications with over 3,000 employees.[11] United Food and Commercial Workers report that organizing efforts in 1985 yielded 8,500 new members for the union.[12] National unions, especially those concentrated within the public sector, have also intensified their organizing activities, in many cases despite cutbacks in resources and organizing staff. CUPE, Canada's largest union, has placed emphasis on bringing CLC chartered local independent unions under their leadership,[13] and NUPGE has broadened its organizing mandate to include any employees "in related employment".[14]

There is also evidence of a trend toward discarding or broadening of traditional jurisdictions and increased union-raiding in the pursuit of organizing new members. For example, in 1985 the Machinists organized its first unit of security guards; the Steelworkers branched out into nursing homes, retail outlets and, once again, into the banking industry, and also took over a fishing industry unit from the CSN in a string of raids by CLC affiliates over rival federations.[15] Other recent examples of branching out are efforts by the Quebec Teaching Congress and the OSSTF to embrace other professional groups and even school board secretaries, mergers between the CFL, the federation of building trades, with the Alberta association of registered nursing assistants and Manitoba's para-medical association, between CUPE and the Canadian association of flight attendents, between CAW and the Canadian Airline Employees' Association and the amalgamation of a number of Brewery worker locals into UFCW and NUPGE. The CFL is also making overtures to bring the New Brunswick public service employees into their fold. The

Canadian Auto Workers, in a very controversial move, is in the process of taking over one of the largest locals of the Food and Commercial Workers, the Newfoundland fishermen's union, thereby making their presence felt in the Atlantic Provinces.

Although raiding and merging provide faster growth than does organizing the unorganized, a study of 14 unions between 1981-85 has revealed that approximately 90% of union growth activity is concentrated in traditional jurisdictions, and almost all of it in attempting to organize non-union workers.[16] The study found that certification drives were more successful than raid, takeover or merger attempts, but mergers or raids when successful added four to six times as many members as the average successful certification drive. The study suggests that reports of the disintegration of traditional union boundaries may be exaggerated, and concludes that unions require a marketing strategy to determine how best they can expect to increase their membership, through either market penetration or market development. Last year the BCGEU established an organizing and union planning department to consider these and other issues relating to the social, economic and political trends affecting their union in the long run.[17] Similarly, NUPGE held its first-ever organizing seminar in 1984, inviting speakers from the Retail Workers' Union and the Electrical Workers' union to the meeting where representatives from all three groups urged mutual cooperation in expanding organizing activities.[18]

Unions have been advising their local executives to monitor trouble spots closely to guard against union-raiding,[19] and a common trend across all major unions has been stepped-up educational campaigns directed at their membership

to heighten solidarity and also to tighten the bonds of loyalty to their union. National campaigns such as PSAC's "Working for You"[20] and CUPE's "Special National Defence Program"[21] are two such examples.

Mergers have come to be regarded as increasingly attractive ventures from both the viewpoint of the larger union trying to fortify its base and that of the smaller union seeking both strength and increased access to resources. Since 1983 there have been at least twelve major mergers between unions with over 1,000 members, most of which have been CLC affiliates.[22] Recent conventions of the Paperworkers' union, The International Woodworkers union which recently broke away from its American affiliates, and the United Mineworkers' Union have approved active searches for a merger.[23] An innovative yet risky strategy both to overcome declining resources and to increase membership is the trend toward discount dues. The CAW recently waived membership dues for Molsons workers in Barrie; dues will not be imposed until the CAW begins to negotiate their next contract. Earlier last year, NUPGE granted discount dues until 1989 to members of the SPPQ (Syndicat de professionnelles et professionels du Quebec), but CUPE has resisted offering further discounts; the Ontario Hydro Employees' Union (local 1000) is currently the only local to receive special dues. The Steelworkers have devised new associate memberships for unemployed Steelworkers in order to strengthen their connection to that union, and such unions as CUPE, MGEA and the UFCW have been helping to fund and staff jobless centres, raising their profile among the currently unemployed.[24]

Unions in Canada have been turning to their advantage the economic constraints posed by the post-recession period by restructuring their appeal to attract a broader membership base. In the absence of traditionally high

wage settlements, they have been channeling their energies and resources into a distinct pattern of social unionist activity, including lobbying the governments on improved labour legislation, tougher occupational health and safety standards, nuclear disarmament, programs geared to preserving the standard of living, and women's issues.[25]

Rising labour force participation rates of women have made such social platforms as affirmative action, sexual harassment, pay equity and daycare facilities of paramount importance. Within the last three years Canada's three largest unions formally established affirmative action courses or committees. In March 1985, PSAC sponsored its first national women's conference as a forum for devising strategies to deal with women's concerns at the local level and, at its 1984 convention, the CLC formally amended its constitution to provide for six out of its fourteen positions of vice-president to be held by women. Another resolution at the same convention provided for a mandatory contribution from affiliates to a fund devoted to social action. Totaling $1 million annually, the fund will allow for union expenditures on social and political work should future crises such as the recent recession deplete overall membership dues.[26]

II. Bargaining Outcomes and Approaches

With unemployment persisting at nearly 10 percent since the recession, continuing poor job prospects, uncertainties related to the rapid pace of technological change, and the management emphasis on greater compensation and work flexibility, unions' bargaining strength has been eroded significantly in the past few years. Wage settlements have been below the rate of inflation. Unions have had to agree to wage cuts, wage freezes, elimination or

modification of COLA clauses, lump-sum payments in lieu of wage rate increases and two-tier wage systems in many bargaining situations, particularly in industries and sectors hard hit by recession and experiencing weak and uncertain recovery or mounting competitive pressures. Real wages of union workers have declined and their relative position vis-a-vis nonunion workers has deteriorated.[27]

However, unions have taken a strong position on "concession bargaining" and have refused to give in on long term employment and compensation flexibility demands of management without appropriate job and union security guarantees. They have successfully resisted introduction of profit sharing and other contingent compensation systems as an alternative to standard wage increases, favouring instead revenue-sharing and pay-price deals. For example, last year the Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union bargained an Expo bonus for its 2,000 members, and the CBRTGW bargained a revenue-sharing program with CN's Hotel Vancouver, with the employer releasing its monthly financial statements to the union in a show of good faith. As well, the Steelworkers have begun to set a pattern with negotiating pay-price triggers for such products as coal, nickel, silver and gold.[28]

Union priorities in the current environment have emphasized job security clauses. Consequently, provisions such as guarantees against the contracting out of work and the use of part-time workers have been of prime importance, as have no lay-off provisions for senior workers, longer notices and advance consultation on plant-closings and technological change, employer sponsored training and retraining and improved severance packages.[29]

Unions have been similarly steadfast in their opposition to QWL, Quality

Circles, team concepts and related employee involvement programs. They have taken the position that such participatory programs are rarely genuine attempts to enhance quality of worklife and tend to undermine the representative role of the union at the workplace. Unions have come to believe that for QWL and QC to be meaningful there has to be greater information sharing by management on financial operations and organization development plans, a commitment to improve working conditions, less rigid adherence to management rights, and a formal union involvement in participatory mechanisms. Unions favour the on-going collective bargaining in the form of joint labour-management and related problem-solving committees as the most effective mechanisms for bringing workers into the decision-making process.[30] Unions appear to be convinced that given the past history of mutual distrust and suspicion workplace innovations have to be incremental, evolutionary and within the collective bargaining context.[31]

III. Cooperation and Consultation Strategies

Against the background of rising "conservatism" in public policy, negative public perception of unions, and the growing threat of competition and protectionism in many sectors of the economy, unions have become increasingly conscious of the need for more cooperation and solidarity within the labour movement and for bilateral cooperation with employers on issues of mutual concern.

For example, despite the stiff competition in organizing activity, there has been a rising trend toward cooperation and support among major unions. Some unions, particularly those in the public sector have stepped up public awareness campaigns to demonstrate that work stoppages cannot always be

ascribed to unions. In the face of perceived intolerance for unions, both CUPE and NUPGE have called for informal coalitions to heighten solidarity between public and private sector unions and between unionized and nonunion workers.[32] The overriding theme of NUPGE's "Facing the Future" conference in 1984 was solidarity and was attended by representatives from major unions and, for the first time, a major conference was jointly sponsored last year by NUPGE, CUPE and PSAC focusing on the impact of public sector cutbacks and concerted strategies to combat them.[33] Similarly paperworkers, woodworkers and the pulp, paper and woodworkers of Canada have been discussing a coalition. A few unionists have also talked about a loose metal workers' federation consisting of steelworkers, autoworkers and machinists.

On the national front, unions have taken a common stand in vigorously opposing such government initiatives as free trade, deregulation and privatization of public services. Perceiving such policies as a fundamental tearing of the social fabric of the nation, unions have stepped up their government lobbying efforts and media campaigns geared to increase public appreciation of these issues. Free trade negotiations with the United States especially have come under union fire owing to the fear that increased competition will force down unit labour costs and lead to union concessions, wage rollbacks, and layoffs.[34] Unions have also put up a common front in campaigns for full employment policies and against legislative initiatives restricting union security and collective bargaining. Union solidarity has been evident on issues relating to the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Unions have joined hands to fight increasing use of the Charter to challenge union security, strike and picketing rights and the political rights and freedoms of workers.

Unions have also become more open on increased dialogue, consultation and cooperation with employers on issues of mutual concern, especially in industries where collective bargaining relationships are mature and long-established. For example, the United Steelworkers have become a partner in the Steel Industry Conference to engage in a continuing process of information sharing and consultation in search of more effective adjustment and adaptation to growing U.S. protectionism. In the auto industry, the CAW is actively participating in discussion with the "Big Three" on restructuring and revitalizing the industry to meet foreign cost and quality competition. Similar moves on industry-level consultation and cooperation are underway in paper, forestry and meat packing industries.

IV. Conclusions

The trade union movement in Canada in the 1980s has faced unprecedented pressures from a vastly altered economic, social and public policy environment, affecting its traditional organizational and bargaining strength and challenging its very legitimacy. The enormity of the challenge has spawned a debate over whether unions in Canada, like their counterparts in the United States, are becoming a passing phenomenon or whether they can adapt and change to remain a strong and viable partner in the industrial relations system. Unions in Canada have not only survived but have shown a remarkable vibrancy and dynamism in their organizational and bargaining approaches and in their cooperation and consultation strategies. In so doing they have demonstrated their ability to adapt to changing circumstances in assuming a flexibility in their traditional goals, priorities, organizational structures, and policies and practices. This flexibility augurs well for the future of unions in Canada.

The fact that unions have survived is not to suggest that they have overcome the challenges confronting them or that their future is assured. Since only about two-fifths of Canada's workforce is unionized, the legitimacy of unions is not yet fully accepted. There is a large potential of unorganized workers still to be organized. Despite both attempts to broaden their appeal and concerted organizing efforts, unions have not succeeded in retailing and banking, the two large and expanding sectors of non-union employment. Unions are still fighting for acceptance as a socially desirable and necessary institution of the collective voice of workers.

The union movement in Canada also remains divided with many voices of labour. The growing trend towards mergers and raids to enlarge union bases without regard for traditional jurisdictions has the potential for increased inter-union conflict and rivalry, and has serious implications for the solidarity of the movement.

Unions also continue to face a difficult and uncertain public policy environment emanating from the Charter, and from adverse legislative changes in a number of labour relations jurisdictions.[35] There is evidence of hardened bargaining by governments, and continuing opposition to unionism from a large segment of private sector employers. The Canadian trade union movement is still at a crossroads.

Notes

1. See statements of the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops and the United Church of Canada on the Eaton's Strike, February 1985.
2. Vector Union Report (VUR), February 28, 1986.
3. See Pradeep Kumar with Mary Lou Coates and David Arrowsmith, The Current Industrial Relations Scene In Canada, 1986. Kingston; Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, pp. 61-62. Herein referred to as The Current Scene.
4. Ibid, p. 61 and pp. 307-317.
5. Ibid, pp. 58-60, p. 289.
6. The resurgence of the autonomy issue is related to the growing divergence in Canadian and U.S. bargaining approaches and outcomes. The split in auto workers union in 1986 and the recent breakaway of International Woodworkers from its American affiliates are two key examples. The autonomy issue has also been a source of strain in UFCW and USWA.
7. The combined membership of unions with 30,000 and more members has gone up from 2.18 million in 1981, 62 percent of the total union membership, to 2.38 million or 66 percent of the total membership. See The Current Scene, p. 59 and p. 293.
8. Ibid p. 58 and p. 291. The proportion of total membership in international unions has declined from 70 percent in 1966 to 44 percent in 1982 to 39 percent in 1986.
9. See The Current Scene, p. 63.
10. Ibid, p. 59, and Labour Canada, Directory of Labour Organizations in Canada (annual), Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada.

11. USWA, Officers' Report, 1984.

12. UFCW, Action, Vol. 4 No. 2 (1986).

13. CUPE, The Facts, Vol.7 No. 6 (1985).

14. NUPGE, Convention Proceedings, (1984).

15. VUR, December 1985 and January 1987.

16. Clive Gibson and Ian Spencer, "Trade Union Growth and Structure: An Interdisciplinary Perspective" in the Proceedings of 23rd Annual Meeting of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association, Winnipeg, May 29-31, 1986.

17. VUR, May 9, 1986.

18. NUPGE, Notes, July - August 1984 and November - December 1984.

19. For example, See CUPE, The Facts, Vol. 7, No. 6 (1986).

20. PSAC, Argus-Journal, May 1985.

21. CUPE, The Public Employee, Fall 1985.

22. The Current Scene 1986, pp. 346-347 and VUR (various issues).

23. VUR, 5 and 19 December 1986.

24. VUR, November 1985, March 1986 and August 1986.

25. See for example, the NUPGE 1984 convention resolutions which included such issues as affirmative action, contracting-out, condemnation of governments' inactivity in fighting unemployment, daycare, etc. Similar resolutions have been passed at the conventions of other unions and federations. See Canadian Labour (recent issues) and The Current Scene 1986, pp. 67-68.

26. Reported in VUR, May 9, 1986.

27. See The Current Scene 1986, pp. 69-74 and 81-83, and The Conference Board of Canada's Compensation Planning Outlook '87 (Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada, October 1986). The Conference Board survey suggests that wage increases for non-union employees are running ahead of negotiated adjustments for union workers.

28. VUR, May, October and November 1986.

29. See The Current Scene 1986, pp. 74-79.

30. See for example The Canadian UAW (now CAW) Collective Bargaining and Legislative Program for 1984 negotiations (July 1984), Policies of the Canadian Paperworkers Union, (September 1986).

31. An example is the CAW attitude to workplace innovations, see Automotive: Report of the automotive industry human resources taskforce (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1986) pp. 90-102.

32. CUPE, The Public Employee, Spring 1984.

33. NUPGE, Notes Vol. 3 No. 1 (1984).

34. CUPE, The Public Employee, Spring 1984 and The Facts, Vol. 7 No. 5 (1986).

35. An example is the proposed changes in British Columbia Labour Code tabled in the legislature on April 2, 1987. Unions believe that the proposed changes would severely restrict collective bargaining rights and greatly increase government intervention in labour relations.

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